

**Amendments to the Claims**

Please amend the claims as follows:

1. (currently amended) A method comprising:

determining whether to inform a user of an interactive television service of receipt of an email message, the determining made independent of any query by the user of any email server or email account; responsive to determining to inform the user of the receipt of the email message, generating a hot key signal indicating availability of the email message; and

inserting the hot key signal into a content signal transmitted to the user from an interactive television service provider via a network with which the user and the interactive television service provider are connected,

whereby inserting the hot key signal into the content signal comprises multiplexing the hot key signal with the content signal and modulating the multiplexed signal for delivery to the user.

2. (original) The method of claim 1, wherein determining whether to inform the user of the interactive television service of receipt of the email message comprises periodically polling a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of the user.

3. (original) The method of claim 2, further comprising:

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retrieving the email message from the POP account; and

sending the email message to the user as part of the hot key signal.

4. (original) The method of claim 2, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by the interactive television service provider.

5. (original) The method of claim 2, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) other than the interactive television service provider.

6. (currently amended) A method comprising:

receiving, as part a content signal sent by an interactive television service to at least one viewer, a hot key signal that is multiplexed into the content signal and modulated with the content signal, indicating receipt of an email message by a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of a user of an interactive television service; the hot key signal independent of any query by the user or user equipment of any email server or email account,

determining whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user; and

responsive to determining the hot key signal is relevant to the user, displaying on a screen an indication that the hot key signal has been received.

7. (original) The method of claim 6, further comprising responsive to receiving an indication that the hot key is accepted, presenting to the user the email message indicated by the hot key signal.

8. (original) The method of claim 6, wherein determining whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user comprises determining whether a destination address for the hot key signal is an address of the user.

9. (original) The method of claim 6, wherein the hot key signal comprises an Internet Protocol (IP) data packet.

10. (currently amended) The method of claim 9, wherein the Internet Protocol [IP] data packet has a header portion and a body portion, the body portion having a data field containing the email message.

11. (currently amended) A system comprising:  
a content reception, distribution, and switching portion connected with one or more content providers to receive and redistribute interactive television (TV) content;

a head-end transport portion connected with the content reception, distribution, and switching portion to and encode, multiplex and transmit content signals from the content reception, distribution, and switching portion over a network;

a hot key generation portion to:

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determine whether to inform a user of an interactive television service of receipt of an email message, the determining made independent of any query by the user or user equipment of any email server or email account, and

responsive to determining to inform the user of the receipt of the email message, generate a hot key signal indicating availability of the email message, wherein the hot key signal is multiplexed and modulated with the content signal.

12. (original) The system of claim 11, wherein the head-end transport portion receives the hot key signal from the hot key generation portion, and multiplexes the hot key signal with the content signal.

13. (original) The system of claim 11, wherein the hot key generation portion determines whether to inform the user of the interactive television service of receipt of the email message by periodically polling a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of the user.

14. (original) The system of claim 13, wherein the hot key generation portion retrieves the email message from the POP account and includes the email message as part of the hot key signal.

15. (original) The system of claim 13, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by the interactive television service provider.

16. (original) The system of claim 13, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) other than the interactive television service provider.

17. (currently amended) A system comprising: a tuner, receiver for receiving a content signal to a user, [and] demodulator portion and a demultiplexor portion to receive a hot key signal contained in the content signal indicating receipt of an email message by a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of a user of an interactive television service; the hot key signal independent of any query by the user or user equipment of any email server or email account, and

a processor to:

determine whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user and, responsive to determining the hot key signal is relevant to the user, display on a screen an indication that the hot key signal has been received,

wherein the demodulator portion demodulates the hot key signal with the content signal and the demultiplexor portion demultiplexes the hot key signal from the content signal.

18. (original) The system of claim 17, wherein the processor, responsive to receiving an indication that the hot key is accepted, presents to the user the email message indicated by the hot key signal.

19. (original) The system of claim 17, wherein the processor determines whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user based on whether a destination address for the hot key signal is an address of the user.

20. (original) The system of claim 17, wherein the hot key signal comprises an Internet Protocol (IP) data packet.

21. (currently amended) The system of claim 20, wherein the Internet Protocol [IP] data packet has a header portion and a body portion, the body portion having a data field containing the email message.

22. (currently amended) A machine-readable medium having stored thereon a series of instructions, the instructions, when executed by a processor, cause the processor to:

determine whether to inform a user of an interactive television service of receipt of an email message;

responsive to determining to inform the user of the receipt of the email message, generate a hot key signal indicating availability of the email message; and

insert the hot key signal into a content signal transmitted to the user from an interactive television service provider via a network with which the user and the interactive television service provider are connected;

wherein the determination to inform the user of the receipt of the email message is made independent of any query by the user or user equipment of any email server or email account, and the hot key signal is multiplexed and modulated with the content signal.

23. (original) The machine-readable medium of claim 22, wherein determining whether to inform the user of the interactive television service of receipt of the email message comprises periodically polling a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of the user.

24. (original) The machine-readable medium of claim 23, wherein the instructions further cause the processor to:

retrieve the email message from the POP account; and  
send the email message to the user as part of the hot key signal.

25. (original) The machine-readable medium of claim 23, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by the interactive television service provider.

26. (original) The machine-readable medium of claim 23, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) other than the interactive television service provider.

27. (currently amended) A machine-readable medium having stored thereon a series of instructions, the instructions, that when executed by a processor, cause the processor to:

receive, from a receiver that demodulates and demultiplexes a hot key signal contained in a content signal to a user of an interactive television service, [a] the hot key signal indicating receipt of an email message by a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of [a] the user [of an interactive television service];

determine whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user; and responsive to determining the hot key signal is relevant to the user, display on a screen an indication that the hot key signal has been received; wherein the hot key signal is independent of any query by the user or user equipment of any email server or email account.

28. (original) The machine-readable medium of claim 27, further comprising responsive to receiving an indication that the hot key is accepted, presenting to the user the email message indicated by the hot key signal.

29. (original) The machine-readable medium of claim 27, wherein determining whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user comprises determining whether a destination address for the hot key signal is an address of the user.

30. (original) The machine-readable medium of claim 27, wherein the hot key signal comprises an Internet Protocol (IP) data packet.

31. (currently amended) The machine-readable medium of claim 30, wherein the Internet Protocol [IP] data packet has a header portion and a body portion, the body portion having a data field containing the email message.